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Subjects for Meditation

No 2

The Wheat and The Tares

BY THE

Rev FATHER MATURIN Rector

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The Wheat and The Tares

A Meditation

By the REV FATHER MATURIN Rector

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field:

But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way.

But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also.

So the servants of the household came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares?

He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?

But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them.

Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.—S. Matt. xiii: 24–30.

In the last parable our Lord showed three causes of the failure of grace—superficiality, a lack of perfect conversion, preoccupation of mind, whether with pleasure or trouble; these either act as a complete barrier to the growth of grace, or stifle or choke it.

But all these obstacles lie in ourselves. They are in one way or another the outcome of a lack of self-discipline or proper care. They are *natural* difficulties that should be met by proper precautions and due care. True, indeed, we must look for help from God's Holy Spirit to overcome them, but all that help will be useless without our own personal efforts. Prayer and Sacraments will not *make* a thoughtless person think, nor one whose mind is overburdened with trouble, calm and trustful; these must practice mental discipline, must use natural means while at the same time they look to God. The mind with which we do our daily duties is the same instrument with which we think about God and pray. If in all the ordinary concerns of life we are careless and slovenly and lacking in thoroughness, we shall never be able to pray with earnestness and devotion. A man wonders that his religious life is so complete a failure, and thinks God deals hardly with him, but he has only to look at his natural life to learn the reason of all his failure. He can't pray; he can't meditate; he can't get any fruit from his Communion, for the same reason that he can't do his work accurately—can't concentrate his mind even upon things that are pleasant to him to think about.

There are then causes of failure that are purely natural, and that must be met by natural means. "Wherefore criest thou unto me, Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward?"

There are many persons who attribute all their faults and failings to the personal action of the devil, whereas the devil has simply to leave them to their own carelessness or sloth or worldliness, and the evil will work itself out. It was not the devil who tempted you to that distraction in prayer—it was your own mind, which you had never taken the trouble to train, that wandered whither it listed. It was not the devil that choked that better aspiration before it bore the fruit of a good act—it was your

lest the seed should be planted, which will grow beyond all power of anticipation.

For our Lord says the seed was planted "while men slept." One moment's thoughtlessness and the evil may be done. The hand of the enemy is stretched over us scattering the seed. One half-hour's conversation, one visit, one unguarded look, one question asked and answered, and the seed is sown, and the enemy goes his way, content to bide his time. He knows the fearful vitality of evil, and he knows perhaps the soil in which he has planted it. What would we not give to be able to obliterate from our life and memories the evil learnt in one day, in one hour perhaps—but we can't. It seems a terrible punishment for a moment's thoughtlessness or for one act of deliberate sin. Yet this is not God's doing, it is but the working out of a natural law. God's warning against the knowledge of evil has from the very first ever been the same—the wisest for man—of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil "Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die." It is in the midst of the garden constantly intruding itself upon our thoughts. But the warning is to keep away from it—to feed ourselves upon the other fruits which are not forbidden—to eat of the tree of life—and so to have no appetite for the knowledge of evil. It is easier to guard against the knowledge of evil, however wearying the watch may be, than to undo its effects. To remedy the consequences of that one act of evil curiosity, it needed the Incarnation and the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ; and even that mighty Remedy—how ineffectual it has sometimes seemed!

Yet it is the one longing which the penitent sinner has, at least at the beginning of his conversion, that he might be as though he never had sinned. Later on, as he grows in grace, he grows in patience, and is more willing to bear the consequences of what he has done. But at first the one longing is, at once and at any cost, to pluck up the tares which have been growing.

"The servants said unto Him, wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?" May I not destroy them now and have done with them? So does the soul feel when it awakens to the sense of

him as distinct from himself. "If I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it but sin that dwelleth in me." Much more can we say it of much of the evil that comes to us quite independently of any action of our own will.

We then have three conditions of the soul; the soul itself in its condition of natural good and natural evil; the soul giving nourishment to the good seed of grace, and bringing forth the divine fruit thirty-fold, sixty-fold, an hundred-fold; the soul giving nourishment to the tares—the supernatural evil—the evil which is not its own by nature, but which has been planted in it by another sower, the enemy of Jesus Christ.

Let us notice how this evil works in the soul to hinder the operation of grace.

It is a seed planted in the soil—the seed is sown and then the sower "went his way"—there is no more that he can do. And whether that evil seed grows or not, like the good seed, entirely depends upon the soil.

It is a seed—so small—almost imperceptible, yet it may be the beginning of the greatest sin. Wrapped up within the folds of that little seed there lies potentially the great tree that will one day grow from it—and from that little seed of evil—that wrong thought or desire—that doubt—that look—that question suggested by an evil curiosity, sprang that great and manifold form of sin which grew in years to such vast and unforeseen proportions. Many a man can trace back the sin, which throughout his life has caused him the most bitter sorrow and the deepest shame, to something that was said or done or shown him in his early boyhood, which perhaps he did not understand, but only had the feeling that it was wrong—and in time it grew and laid more and more hold upon him till every power of his nature has been sacrificed to nourish the seed which ruins him. "The enemy sowed his seed and went his way." The same suggestion of evil may have been made to another and never been able to grow. That evil suggestion has, it is true, an awful power of expansion into great sin, but it can't grow unless it falls into a soil that will give it nourishment. We are told that many of the most deadly diseases owe their origin

to microsopic germs which float about in the air, and that while they may be breathed in by multitudes of people, the disease is caught only by those whose physical state is such as to give nourishment to them. Some breathe them unharmed, others at once fall victims to their deadly effects. It is just the same with the spiritual disease of sin. The evil sower goes out to sow his seed and some falls upon a soil that at once assimilates it and it grows with a terrible rapidity. Others fall upon a ground that will not let it penetrate beneath the surface, and having no root it withers away.

We might apply the parable of the sower to this parable, seeing how the evil seed may fall upon the beaten or rocky or thorny ground or good ground, each soil being more or less adapted to give nourishment to the evil seed.

It is then, with sin, as with grace—the evil may be planted, but it can only be planted in its germinal state, the growth must depend upon ourselves. There have been men and women whose lives were lived in constant and close contact with sights of sin, but it never was able to take possession of their hearts, they kept themselves pure amidst it all—and there are others whose lives from the first have been sheltered from much knowledge of evil, yet who seem to have an instinctive aptitude for catching at and developing whatever evil they do see.

Circumstances and surroundings will not *make* us good or bad. The power is in ourselves. There is in the acceptance or rejection of grace or of sin room for the exercise of our own free will. To us as truly as to Christ, Satan has to make the suggestion and wait for our acceptance or refusal: "Cast thyself down." It never can be "I will cast thee down." True, we may not know the full consequences of our decision. We may not know all that is involved in yielding to the wrong suggestion. It may have seemed at the moment but a very trivial thing, but we knew it was wrong and we knew we had the power to decide one way or the other. The seed fell into the soil and forthwith it began to grow. The more we know ourselves to be naturally inclined to evil of any kind the more unwearied we should be in watching

lest the seed should be planted, which will grow beyond all power of anticipation.

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"The servants said unto Him, wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?" May I not destroy them now and have done with them? So does the soul feel when it awakens to the sense of

its sin, and often it thinks it can be done—that by a great effort of the will and an earnest struggle it can root out the evil that has grown there, and in time be as though it never had sinned. It is only as years go on, and the struggle increases, and penitence deepens, that it learns the full deep meaning of those words of our Lord, the answer to the soul longing to be rid of its past acts—"Nay, lest while ye gather up the tares ye root up also the wheat with them; let both grow together till the harvest." The secret of recovery is through struggle, suffering and endurance—temptation will go on—on perhaps to the end of life—the two seeds have been sown and are each struggling for the nourishment necessary for their growth, which they can draw only from the soil of the soul. This struggle must go on—the memory, the desire for evil—the wakened passion—the nature hungering after the forbidden fruit which has been tasted—all this must go on. You who have known sin can never be, in this world, as though you had not known it—desires have been stirred up in you that other men have no knowledge of—your penitence will be tested, your growth secured, by the resistance to temptation which once you yielded to. I will not tell the drunkard that if he turns to God he will ere long be the same as the man who never was a drunkard, or the sensualist that soon he will forget or hate his sensuality. I will tell him something better and more ennobling than that—I will give him a more manly hope—I will tell him that he may perhaps, very likely, all his life be tempted—that he will have to avoid things that other men might do with impunity—that he will see evil where other men see none—that at times the old passion will cry out for food, that he will feel its cravings like one dying of hunger or thirst—that at times he may have to endure agonies, both of mind and body, to keep himself from a relapse, but that this is the condition of victory and of final success—that he might have lived without ever knowing this fearful struggle, but that now he cannot—that by this means his sincerity is put to the test, and his will is recovering itself from the weakness which is the result of past sin.

This is what our Lord teaches in His answer to the servants

who longed, by one strong, decisive act, to root out the evil. It can't be done—you would pluck up the wheat at the same time—the habits that form character are so closely interwoven that the bad habits can't be destroyed in a moment—there is but one remedy—starve out the evil—don't give them any support or nourishment—let them die for want of food—give your whole nature to the support of the good seed, and the tares will die off and be readily separated, in the harvest, from the wheat.

This must be the hope, the strength, of the penitent. This his one great effort, his hope—the final rooting out of evil and his complete restoration. His one great effort, to let no power of his soul or body give any nourishment to the evil that once he delighted in. And this he must do in two ways: First, by constant effort against those sins, and keeping away from temptation—by giving no place in memory, imagination, or will, to what once perhaps they fed upon. But this is not all. It is but poor encouragement to tell a sinner he must not sin. He must *do* something. If he is to refrain from evil he must *do* good. If his eyes are to be turned away lest they behold vanity, he must also be quickened in God's way. He must feed upon something. He must have occupation for his active nature, and so according to our Lord's teaching, the penitent is urged to be active—to use his powers and his mind. He is taught that penitence consists not merely in the desire to be rid of sin, but in the effort to do good; that the victory over sin is the growth in holiness, the conquest of bad habits, the formation of good; that the reformation of life is the yielding up of the powers of our mind and body which once were made the instruments of sin, to the thoughts and efforts after holiness. Let evil be *supplanted* by good. Let the soil of your nature give all its energy to the support of the seed of grace. "Then in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn." Then the dead dried-up stalks of the tares that disfigured the field will be destroyed, and the soul will be completely restored, the effect of past sin will be removed. "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." The garments

once so stained will be spotless in their restored purity. "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple."